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Trump's 'new' Afghanistan Policy: a critique

[Home](#) / [Issue 4 October 2017](#) / Trump's 'new' Afghanistan Policy: a critique

[Issue 4 October 2017](#) |

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President Trump's recently announced Afghanistan policy puts US geopolitical and economic interests first. It appears little concerned with developing peace, infrastructure, and public confidence in Afghanistan itself. It also risks stoking regional rivalries, notably between India and Pakistan. Thomas Merritt, Abdullah Yusuf, and Joseph Royce cast a critical eye across the issues.

On 21 August, the US President Donald Trump delivered a speech laying out his administration's ['new' foreign policy approach](#) in Afghanistan. This approach is based upon three 'pillars' that Trump insists will lead to 'victory' in Afghanistan. The first pillar involves the expansion of the US military presence, based upon 'conditions on the ground' instead of arbitrary time limits. The second focuses on Pakistan, with Trump deriding the government in Islamabad for not doing enough to root out Islamist militants within its borders. The final pillar is further developing the strategic partnership between the US and India, with President Trump calling on Delhi to 'help us more with Afghanistan'.

Despite Trump's insistence that this marks a novel approach to Afghanistan, the move could just as easily have been taken from the Afghanistan playbook of Obama or Bush, as many commentators [have pointed out](#). But lack of originality is hardly the biggest flaw in Trump's 'new' approach. The President has openly stated that he will not "rebuild countries in our own [US] image" but rather "pursue our security interests above all other considerations". In short, Trump's foreign policy will forego attempts at creating a stable Afghanistan in favour of a military solution: "we are not nation building, we are killing terrorists."

Former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai summed up the concerns over the Trump approach: "There was not a single word about the peace effort. It was all talk of war, and we have had enough of that."

To Trump supporters, a strong military response may be a clear sign of putting the US national interest first. But to those who live in Afghanistan and experience the consequences of US adventurism first-hand, further pain and suffering will be the first thing that springs to

mind. Former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai summed up the concerns over the Trump approach: [“There was not a single word about the peace effort. It was all talk of war, and we have had enough of that.”](#)

FAILING TO LOOK BEYOND MILITARY ‘SOLUTIONS’

If Trump’s focus is upon “preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan”, a military response devoid of any state-building is doomed to fail, as many within Afghanistan see corruption and poor governance as major causes of the insurgents’ success. Of course, the Taliban is unlikely to agree to lay down arms and stop fighting for control of Afghanistan just because the US asks it to; a military component to any Afghan policy is required.

But those who know Afghanistan know that a military response must be utilised alongside other elements which aim to enhance the power of the Afghan state. According to Karzai: [“\(w\)hat we need is for the United States to help us find peace, rebuild our country and institutionalize the Afghan state.”](#) Yet these policy approaches are exactly the kind that Trump has set himself against.

It is interesting to note that this ‘new’ approach marks a profound policy shift for the Trump administration. One of the defining features of Trump’s anti-establishment method of politics was to avoid ‘fighting unwinnable wars’, putting his mouth where a large part of the US electorate had been for decades. Trump’s new approach flies in the face of that, and even hints at expanding US military involvement beyond the levels of previous administrations.

As gung-ho as Trump presently is about chasing terrorists in Afghanistan, this wasn’t always the case. In June 2013, he tweeted: “Let’s get out of Afghanistan. Our troops are being killed by the Afghanis we train and we waste billions there. Nonsense! Rebuild the USA.” This anti-interventionist stance remained an important part of Trump’s presidential election campaign, appealing to millions of Americans who felt that their views on the Iraq War had been ignored.

In short, it appears the Trump administration is committing itself to an ineffectual and recycled policy on Afghanistan, which will only bring more suffering to the Afghan people. It represents a policy U-turn of epic proportions. However, whilst the Trump administration has proven itself on many occasions to be contradictory and incompetent, this may not be the whole story. There are other, more sinister, motives for Trump’s change of tack on Afghanistan. These motives may be driven by geopolitical and economic considerations in Washington which pay little heed to the plight of Afghanistan.

SHIFTING ALLIANCES, STOKING RIVALRY

The first sign of President Trump’s wider geopolitical agenda is to be found in his comments on Pakistan and India. In his speech, he derided Pakistan for [not doing enough to combat terrorism within its borders](#), and accused it of facilitating the spread of terrorism in Afghanistan by providing a safe haven for terrorist organisations. A day later, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made a statement in which he said [the US would punish Pakistan](#) if it did not address its approach to terrorism within its borders, primarily through cutting aid,

increasing drone strikes, and revoking its status as a major non-NATO US ally. Also within Trump's speech, India's contributions to stability in Afghanistan were highlighted, with Trump urging closer Indian involvement in Afghanistan and cooperation with the US.

While the admonishment of Pakistan was also a feature of the Obama and Bush administrations, the specific call on India for closer involvement in Afghanistan is perhaps the only novel thing about Trump's speech. [Many in Afghanistan noted](#) that it was a strange inclusion, given that Russia, China, and Iran are also vying for footholds in Afghanistan. Yet these countries went without mention in Trump's 'new' approach. However, if we assess Trump's calls for further cooperation with India over Afghanistan in a wider geopolitical setting, we can see a clear logic emerging.

Pakistan-India relations have been strained from the very formation of both states, and Trump has chosen India in order to create a partnership defined by regional competition. This competition is compounded by the fact that China is expanding its influence into Pakistan through the [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#), a mutually beneficial agreement that aims to rapidly modernise Pakistan's infrastructure while providing China with a political base in South Asia.

In this context, Trump's Afghan policy is not concerned with addressing the need to end the suffering of millions of Afghans. Instead, it is focused on countering the growth of other big powers like China in the region by using the [historic rivalry between India and Pakistan](#) as a lever. This interpretation of events is further supported by the fact that Trump has stated he will work with India to create an '[Indo-Pacific security zone](#)', with security cooperation already having been [discussed by both governments](#). In appearing to stoke the Indo-Pakistani fire, Trump is playing power politics between two mutually hostile nuclear states. Compromise under such conditions will be hard to come by, and will only add to instability in the region.

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Trump's veiled attempts at regional power politics have not gone unnoticed. [As Michael Kugelman](#), a Pakistan expert at the Woodrow Wilson Center, recently said: "Trump's comments about India were more unsettling for Pakistanis than his threats to Pakistan." Kugelman's point is matched with commentary from within Pakistan, where there exists a popular view that Trump's new Afghan policy is simply about [destabilising Pakistan](#).

DOLLAR INTERESTS

Geopolitics is not the only potentially sinister element driving behind Trump's policy on Afghanistan. The nation's [vast mineral wealth](#) – reportedly [valued at between \\$1-3 trillion](#) – has been a topic of interest for Trump and his Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross; they are

now ‘sold’ upon investing in Afghanistan’s mining sector. To be fair, the successful development of its mineral industries could give Afghanistan the financial bedrock it needs to extend Kabul’s reach to the rest of the country, and facilitate much-needed infrastructural rebuilding. But once again, Mr Trump appears to be placing US interests before the needs of the Afghan people.

The President has made it clear his wish to recoup for the US some of the [\\$117 billion it spent](#) during the 16 years of war. To date, the US has invested [half a billion dollars](#) in the Afghan mining industry, with nothing to show for it. In a White House meeting in July, Mr Trump argued that the US should [demand a share of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth](#) in exchange for any assistance it gives to the Afghan government.

Even within the 21 August speech, Trump admitted that he was participating in economic development to help [‘defray the cost of the war to us’](#). It thus seems clear where Trump is coming from: his new engagement with Afghanistan is about getting money back from a bad investment – *not* developing Afghan state institutions in order to help Afghanistan and its people.

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The dangers of Trump casting a covetous eye over Afghanistan’s resources have already been noted by Sayed Ikram Afzali, Executive Director of [Integrity Watch Afghanistan](#). He comments that “if President Trump considers our mining sector as ‘war booty’ and doesn’t approach it in a transparent way, it will add fuel to the fire.” The ‘fire’ being referenced by Afzali is the Taliban.

As with any case of American involvement in a Muslim country, the perception of Washington’s motives plays a large role. Currently, the majority of mineral extraction projects in Afghanistan are in the hands of the Taliban, [bringing them millions of dollars each year](#). Military means will be required to bring these resources back under the purview of Kabul; a prolonged US presence may well be necessary to facilitate this transition. Military personnel will be required to take and defend mining sites; industry specialists will also be required to help Afghanistan develop those sites and the wider industry.

It is easy to see how this situation could be a PR dream come true for the Taliban, who will certainly play up the narrative of the US military killing Muslims and then swooping on Afghanistan’s natural resources. If a blunt approach to tapping into Afghanistan’s mineral deposits is taken – and Trump has said nothing so far to suggest otherwise – this could well see Taliban recruitment rise, along with its ability to further destabilise Afghanistan.

A FAMILIARLY BLEAK OUTLOOK

Even assuming that Mr Trump's policy genuinely tries to ensure that Afghanistan benefits from the development of its resources, the outlook looks bleak. The dearth of infrastructure, corruption, and an incompetent Afghan government, combine to make it nigh on impossible [to develop the nation's natural resources](#) effectively. Trump has been unsurprisingly vague on his policy details. However, the range of outcomes arising from US investment in Afghanistan's mines will see, at best, Afghanistan reaping some economic benefits – but also millions of dollars siphoned off into private hands. At worst, this is setting up to be a naked cash grab for the United States, one that will surely fuel the fire of Islamic extremism.

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Hamid Karzai is right: Trump's Afghanistan policy is devoid of any talk of peace and development. It is an approach which is not designed to solve the problems of Afghanistan – it is an 'Afghan' policy in name only. If it were genuinely focused on Afghanistan's well-being, this new stance from Washington would acknowledge the almost 5,000 civilian lives lost each year since 2014, and how to address such losses. It would include measures aimed at alleviating the suffering of the Afghan people, with a road map that could lead to a stable Afghanistan able to protect its own citizens, and end the need for foreign protection.

President Trump's ignoring of all such state-building measures shows his true aims. His real 'Afghanistan policy' is designed to counter the increasing influence of China in south Asia by involving India in a strategic partnership, using Afghanistan's mineral wealth. In so doing, this policy risks stoking the historic tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, something which could destabilise the entire region – or worse. Trump is using the mineral wealth of Afghanistan to fund this new game of power politics, regardless its long-term impact on Afghanistan.

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